

Major ideas of Enlightenment: Kant, Rousseau- Part II – SELF STUDY HISTORY

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The English Enlightenment

The English Civil War and Glorious Revolution:

- Seventeenth-century England endured a pair of tense struggles for political power that had a profound impact on the philosophers of the English Enlightenment. The first power struggle came in 1649, when the English Civil War resulted in the execution of King Charles I and the establishment of a commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. Although this republic endured for a decade, it also essentially devolved into dictatorship, and England ended up reverting to monarchy with the restoration of Charles II to the throne.
- The reestablished monarchy had clear limits placed on its absolute power, however, as was made clear in the bloodless Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which the English people overthrew a king they deemed unacceptable and basically chose their next rulers. The revolution occurred because Charles II's son, James II, was an overt Catholic, which did not sit well with the predominantly Protestant public. The English people rallied behind James II's Protestant daughter, Mary, and her husband, William of Orange, who led a nonviolent coup that dethroned James II and sent him to France.
- When William and Mary ascended the throne, they effectively ended the Catholic monarchy and the idea of divine right. In the years that followed, an English Bill of Rights was drafted, boosting parliamentary power and personal liberties. In this freer environment, science, the arts, and philosophy flourished.

Thomas Hobbes

- The first major figure in the English Enlightenment was the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). In 1640, fearing that some of his writings had angered England's parliament, Hobbes fled to Paris, where he penned a substantial body of his work. He is best known for the epic *Leviathan* (1651), a lengthy, groundbreaking work that explores human nature. *Leviathan*, provided the foundation for socialcontract theory.
- In *Leviathan*, Hobbes elaborates on the nature of man and justifies absolutist rule. He argues that human nature is inherently bad and that humans will remain in a constant a state of war, vying for power and material resources, unless awed by a single great power. However, Hobbes also claims that any group of men who ascend to positions of great power will be prone to abusing it, seeking more power than necessary for the stability of society. Thus, he reasons, a single absolute ruler is better than an oligarchy or democracy; because that ruler's wealth and power is largely equivalent to the wealth and power of the nation, he will seek to lead the nation on a stable and prosperous course. Hobbes claims that this sovereign's main duty is to provide protection to the citizens and that if he fails at that task, allegiance may be transferred to another.
- An atheist, Hobbes long argued that religion is useful as a propaganda machine for the state, as it is the entity most capable of reminding the ignorant masses of their role and their duties.

- He was of the opinion that human life is by nature “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” and was pessimistic about the prospects for progress in a world short on ethics. Fearing, justly, that *Leviathan* might offend certain groups—especially Anglicans and French Catholics—Hobbes figured himself safest at home and returned to London, where he lived out his years privately.
- Commentators have praised Hobbes’s work for its logic and clarity but have disagreed over precisely what he meant. For instance, the rules Hobbes sets forth as to precisely when a citizen may transfer allegiance to a new sovereign are unclear. Basically, only when a ruler kills or ceases to protect a subject may a subject oppose the ruler; at all other times, the subject must remain subservient.
- The greatest criticism of Hobbes focuses on his failure to describe how totally selfish men would be able to create and maintain the covenant of the state. Hobbes represents the pessimistic side of the Enlightenment and sees progress as the result of the *suppression* of man’s instincts rather than the granting of freedom to those instincts.
- Though Hobbes was a champion of absolutism for the sovereign, Hobbes also developed some of the fundamentals of European liberal thought: the right of the individual; the natural equality of all men.

John Locke

- On the opposite side of the spectrum from the pessimistic Hobbes was John Locke (1632–1704), the other major English political philosopher of the seventeenth century. Locke received a prestigious education throughout his youth and remained involved in academics. It was while dabbling in medicine with a mentor that he was introduced to political thought, which then captured his interest. He influenced other thinkers such as Rousseau and Voltaire.
- Locke is still known today for his liberalism in political theory. He was particularly known for developing the **social contract theory**; an idea in political philosophy, typically associated with Locke and Rousseau. The theory stated that a government and its subjects enter into an unspoken contract when that government takes power. The contract states that in exchange for some societal freedoms to the government or establishment and its laws, the subjects receive and are free to demand protection. The **government’s authority lies in the consent of the governed**. Locke is **well known for his assertion that individuals have a right to “Life, Liberty and Property,”** and his belief that the **natural right to property is derived from labor**.
- Locke’s early writings **focus on the religious intolerance** and bickering that was blighting England at the time. Though important, these earlier works did not have nearly the influence or prominence of later works such as *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which Locke puts forth his optimistic idea that man’s mind is a blank slate and that man can subsequently learn and improve through conscious effort.
- Locke was better known for his work ***Two Treatises of Government*** (also 1690). This political work was massively influential, particularly the second treatise, and is still considered the foundation for modern political thought.
- Not surprisingly, Locke’s more optimistic work was more warmly received and more influential than Hobbes’s in the long run. In particular, Locke’s second treatise on government—which details Locke’s belief that every man is inherently good but that the necessity of government requires that people compromise on some issues for the betterment of the whole—has endured. The work sets forth Locke’s ideas for an ideal representative government and makes suggestions that would eventually be elaborated into ideas such as separation of powers—the system that the founding fathers of the United States used when writing the U.S. Constitution.

Scottish Enlightenment:

- By 1750 Scotland's major cities had created an intellectual infrastructure of mutually supporting institutions, such as universities, reading societies, libraries, periodicals, museums and masonic lodges. The Scottish network played a major role in the further development of the transatlantic Enlightenment. In France Voltaire said "we look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilization," and the Scots in turn paid close attention to French ideas.
- The first major philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment was Francis Hutcheson, who held the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow from 1729 to 1746. A moral philosopher who produced alternatives to the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, one of his major contributions was the utilitarian and consequentialist principle that virtue is that which provides, "the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers". Hutcheson, the father of the Scottish Enlightenment, championed political liberty and the right of popular rebellion against tyranny.
- Much of what is incorporated in the scientific method and some modern attitudes towards the relationship between science and religion were developed by his proteges David Hume and Adam Smith.
- David Hume became a major figure in the skeptical philosophical and empiricist traditions of philosophy. He and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers developed a 'science of man' which merged a scientific study of how humans behave in ancient and primitive cultures with a strong awareness of the determining forces of modernity. Modern sociology largely originated from this movement and Hume's philosophical concepts that directly influenced James Madison (and thus the U.S. Constitution).
- Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), often considered the first work on modern economics. Smith advocated liberty in the sphere of commerce and the global economy. It had an immediate impact on British economic policy that continues into the 21st century.
- Scientific progress was influenced by, amongst others, the discovery of carbon dioxide (fixed air) by the Joseph Black and the invention of the steam engine by James Watt.

The French Enlightenment

- Although the first major figures of the Enlightenment came from England, the movement truly exploded in France, which became a hotbed of political and intellectual thought in the 1700s. The roots of this French Enlightenment lay largely in resentment and discontent over the decadence of the French monarchy in the late 1600s.
- During the reign of the wildly extravagant "Sun King" Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715), wealthy intellectual elites began to gather regularly in Parisian salons (often hosted by high-society women) and complain about the state of their country. The salons only grew in popularity when Louis XIV died and the far less competent Louis XV took over.
- Gradually, complaints in the salons and coffee shops changed from idle whining into constructive political thought. Especially after the works of John Locke became widespread, participants at the salons began to discuss substantive political and social philosophies of the day. Before long, cutting-edge thought in a variety of disciplines worked its way into the salons, and the French Enlightenment was born.

The Philosophes

- By the early 1700s, coffee shops, salons, and other social groups were popping up all over Paris, encouraging intellectual discussion regarding the political and philosophical status of the country.
- Moreover, members of these groups increasingly clamored to read the latest work of leading philosophers. These nontraditional thinkers came to be known as the philosophes, a group that championed personal liberties and

the work of Locke and Newton, denounced Christianity, and actively opposed the abusive governments found throughout Europe at the time.

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As varied as they were, the leading French philosophes generally came from similar schools of thought. They were predominantly writers, journalists, and teachers and were confident that human society could be improved through rational thought.

- A large part of the philosophes' attacks were focused on the Church and its traditions. In matters of faith, many of the prominent philosophes were deists—they believed in an all-powerful being but likened him to a “cosmic watchmaker” who simply set the universe in autonomous motion and never again tampered with it.
- Moreover, they disdained organized religion and the Church's traditional idea of the “chain of being,” which implied a natural hierarchy of existence—God first, then angels, monarchs, aristocrats, and so on.
- The philosophes also raised objections against the decadent lifestyles of leading Church representatives, as well as the Church's persistence in collecting exorbitant taxes and tithes from the commoners to fund outlandish salaries for bishops and other Church officials.
- What the philosophes found most appalling, however, was the control that the Church held over impressionable commoners by instilling in them a fear of eternal damnation. The philosophes may have had mixed feelings about the common people, but they had very strong feelings against the Church.
- As a result, they provoked the Church by challenging doctrines such as the existence of miracles and divine revelation, often disproving specific tenets with simple science. The Church, in turn, hated the philosophes and all they stood for.

Literacy

- Complementing and enabling the socially and politically active atmosphere was the dramatically improving literacy rate in France. Beyond just talking about revolutionary ideas, more and more French people, especially in Paris and its surrounds, were reading and writing about them as well.
- A symbiotic relationship developed as readers anxiously awaited more literature from the philosophes, and in turn the response that the writers received compelled them to write more. The scholarly atmosphere at the time also provided women of French society—albeit still within traditional roles as salon hostesses—with an opportunity to contribute to the conversation.

Montesquieu

- One of the leading political thinkers of the French Enlightenment, the Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), drew great influence from the works of Locke. Montesquieu's most critical work, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), tackled and elaborated on many of the ideas that Locke had introduced. He stressed the importance of a separation of powers and was one of the first proponents of the idea of a system of checks and balances in government.
- Although Montesquieu's work had a great effect on the development of democracy, Montesquieu himself believed that no one governmental system better than the others but rather that different forms were better than others in certain situations.
- An early pioneer in sociology, he spent considerable time collecting data from various world cultures, which led him to the rather outlandish conclusion that climate is a major factor in determining the best form of government for a given region.
- Montesquieu believed that environmental conditions affect behavior and response and thus concluded that

governments located in different climates should be adjusted accordingly. Even Montesquieu admitted that this idea worked better in theory than in practice. His legacy therefore lies primarily in his methods, his combination of practicality and Enlightened idealism.

Voltaire

- The primary satirist of the Enlightenment, Francois-Marie Arouet, better known by his pen name Voltaire (1694–1778), entered the literary world as a playwright. He quickly became renowned for his wit and satire.
- In and out of prison and other various predicaments for most of his young life, Voltaire spent a period of exile in England during which he was introduced to the works of Locke and Newton.
- The two thinkers had a profound impact on the young Voltaire, who became wildly prolific in the years that followed, authoring more than sixty plays and novels and countless other letters and poems.
- Voltaire was an avowed deist, believing in God but hating organized religion. As a result, he made Christianity—which he called “glorified superstition”—a frequent target of his wit.
- Voltaire was also an ardent supporter of monarchy and spent a considerable amount of time working toward judicial reform. Later, after bouncing around to various countries and working with a number of notable contemporaries, Voltaire wrote the satire *Candide* (1759), which has since earned distinction as one of the most influential literary works in history.
- Although Voltaire lacked the practical breadth of some of his contemporaries—he did not dabble in multiple scientific fields—he made up for it with the volume of his work. Using his brilliant, sarcastic wit to analyze everything from philosophy to politics to law, he extolled the virtue of reason over superstition and intolerance and effectively became the voice of the Enlightenment.
- Moreover, his satirical style enabled him to make incredibly pointed criticisms while generally avoiding serious prosecution by those he attacked.
- The *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Philosophical Dictionary, 1764) and *Letters on the English* (1733) written by Voltaire (1694–1778) were revolutionary texts that spread the ideals of the Enlightenment. Some of these ideals proved influential and decisive in the course of the French Revolution, which began in 1789.
- In *Letters on the English*, he narrate his experience in England an compared condition in France with British institutions, religion and freedom of expression. French government banned this book. He considered Newton to b greater thafn Caesar. According to him, ‘ We should honor the person who understands the world’.
- In his famous books are “The Age of Louis 14” and “Treatise on Tolerance”. People called him “King Voltaire”
- Although detractors complain that Voltaire never offered any solutions to the problemshe criticized, (so cant be called philosopher) he never aspired to do so. Nonetheless, by merely pointing out problems and criticizing different philosophies, he caused considerable change.

Denis Diderot

- The third major figure of the French Enlightenment was Denis Diderot (1713–1784), a writer and philosopher best known for editing and assembling the massive *Encyclopedie*, an attempt to collect virtually all of human knowledge gathered in various fields up to that point. Twenty-eight volumes in length, the portion of the *Encyclopedie* edited by Diderot was published one volume at a time from 1751 to 1772.
- Diderot, assisted by French mathematician Alembert for part of the project, painstakingly collected as much Enlightenment-era knowledge as he possibly could.
- Beyond just facts, definitions, and explanations, the *Encyclopédie* also included space for philosophes to discuss

their thoughts on various topics.

- A veritable who's-who of Enlightenment-era scholars contributed to the collection, including Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. Due to the highly scientific—and thus untraditional—nature of the *Encyclopedie*, it met with a significant amount of scorn. Diderot was widely accused of plagiarism and inaccuracy, and many considered the collection to be an overt attack on the monarchy and the Church.
- The *Encyclopedie* was one of the primary vehicles by which the ideas of the Enlightenment spread across the European continent, as it was the first work to collect all of the myriad knowledge and developments that the Enlightenment had fostered. However, the *Encyclopedie* succeeded not because it explicitly attempted to persuade people to subscribe to Enlightenment ideas.
- Rather, it simply attempted to present all of the accumulated knowledge of the Western world in one place and let readers draw their own conclusions. Not surprisingly, the power establishment in Europe frowned on the idea of people drawing their own conclusions; the Church and monarchy hated the *Encyclopedie*, as it implied that many of their teachings and doctrines were fraudulent. In response to attempted bans, Diderot printed additional copies in secrecy and snuck them out.